

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
USLO RIYADH
AMEMBASSY SANA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 2943

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1,4
TAGS: PEPR, SY, UR
SUBJ: SYRIAN SUSPICIONS OF SOVIET INTENTIONS

1. SUMMARY: SYRIANS ARE SUSPICIOUS OF SOVIET INTENTIONS IN
MIDDLE EAST. SYRIAN SUSPICIONS ARE FUELED BY PROBLEMS WITH
ARMS AND DEVELOPMENTAL EQUIPMENT DELIVERIES, SOVIET POLICY
TOWARD ERITREA AND AFGANISTAN, PERCEIVED CHANGE IN SOVIET
POLICY TOWARD NON-ALIGNED LEADERS. WHILE NO CRISIS SEEMS
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IMMINENT, SYRIA MAY ONCE AGAIN BE TOYING WITH IDEA OF
REAPPROCHEMENT WITH IRAQ AS TWO COUNTRIES SEE GREATER IDENTITY
IN INTERESTS IN WAKE OF RECENT SOVIET MOVES. IRAQI PRICE
FOR RAPPROCHEMENT, HOWEVER, STILL LIKELY TO BE TOO HIGH.
END SUMMARY.

2. IN CONVERSATIONS WE HAVE HELD OVER WEEKEND WITH

SYRIANS, SOVIETS HAVE COME IN FOR UNUSUALLY SHARP CRITICISM AND SKEPTICISM ABOUT THEIR INTENTIONS. MFA DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL DEVISION, NAJDI JAZZAR, WENT SO FAR AS TO QUESTION WHETHER SOVIET REALLY WANT PEACE IN AREA. HE CONCLUDED THAT EVEN IF SOVIETS WANT TO EXPLOIT NO-PEACE, NO-WAR SITUATION, THEY WILL BE POWERLESS TO INFLUENCE COUNTRIES LIKE SYRIA, JORDAN, AND EGYPT WHICH GENUINELY WANT PEACE. ON BALANCE, THEREFORE, HE THOUGHT THAT TO ENGAGE SOVIET IN PEACE PROCESS WOULD BE PREFERABLE TO KEEPING THEM ISOLATED AND IN OPPOSITION.

3. SUSPICION OF USSR SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN GENERATED BY THREE SYRIAN COMPLAINTS WITH SOVIET BEHAVIOR. FIRST COMPLAINT, HIGHLIGHTED BY AP STRINGER LOUIS FARES, WAS THAT SOVIETS ARE HOLDING BACK ON SHIPMENTS OF MILITARY AND DEVELOPMENTAL EQUIPMENT IN DELIBERATE GO-SLOW CAMPAIGN. TISHRIIN EDITOR GHASSAN RIFAI HINTED THAT ALL WAS NOT WHAT IT SHOULD BE IN THE ARMS RELATIONSHIP, ALTHOUGH HE SAID SYRIA STILL EXPECTS TO RECEIVE MIG 25'S. PROBLEMS WITH SOVIET ARMS DELIVERIES ARE PARTICULARLY GALLING AT THIS POINT IN WAKE OF US AIRCRAFT PLEDGE TO EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA.

4. SECOND CRITICISM STRESSED BY RIFAI WAS BELIEF THAT SOVIETS HAVE MADE A MAJOR CHANGE IN POLICY TOWARD THIRE WORLD. USSR WAS BADLY BURNED IN EGYPT AND HAS ATTAINED LITTLE PRACTICAL RETURN FOR IST HEAVY INVESTMENT IN SYRIA. STRONG INTERNAL CONFIDENTIAL

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PRESSURE IS BEING EXERTED ON SOVIET LEADERSHIP TO ABANDON NON-ALIGNED LEADERS LIKE ASSAD AND THROW SOVIET WEIGHT BEHIND COMMUNIST OR RADICAL PARTIES WHICH ARE WILLING TO RESPOND FAITHFULLY TO SOVIET GUIDANCE. RIFAI CLAIMS THIS PRESSURE FORCED CHANGE IN KREMLIN POLICY AND HAS LED TO MAJOR SOVIET COMMITMENTS IN ETHIOPIA AND AFGHANISTAN.

5. RIFAI ADDED THAT SYRIAN COMMUNIST PARTY LEADER KHALID BAKDASH IS BEING SERVERLY CRITICIZED BY COMMUNISTS INSIDE SYRIA FOR SELLING OUT THE PARTY TO THE SYRIAN REGIME. RIFAI CLAIMS THE SOVIET UNION, WHICH HAD PREVIOUSLY SUPPORTED BAKDASH, HAS NOW THROWN ITS SUPPORT TO MORE RADICAL CYRIAN COMMUNISTS. SYRIAN SUSPICIONS OF SOVIETS HAVE BEEN FUELED BY ANTI-REGIME POSITIONS, PARTICULARLY VIS-A-VIS LEBANON, TAKEN BY RADICAL SYRIAN COMMUNISTS LATELY.

6. THIRD COMPLAINT CENTERED ON SOVIET AND CUBAN ACTIVITIES IN ERITREA. JAZZAR SAID SYRIA IS CONVINCED CUBANS ARE DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN ETHIOPIAN OFFENSIVE AGAINST ERITREANS, IN SPITE OF CUBAN CLAIMS TO CONTRARY. HE SPECULATED THAT IF ERITREANS CAN HOLD OUT IN CURRENT FIGHTING,CCUBANS WILL DROP ALL PRETENSE AND BLATANTLY JOIN IN THE OFFENSIVE. FOR

FIRS TIME, JAZZAR HINTED THAT USG IS NOT SHOULDERING ITS RESPONSIBILITIES IN AFRICA. AS EVIDENCE OF THIS, JAZZAR SAID CUBANS ARE COMPLETELY SATISFIED WITH US HANDS-OFF POLICY.

7. SOVIETS, ACCORDING TO FARES, ARE USING LIBYA AS STAGING AREA FOR WEAPONS FLOWING INTO ETHIOPIA. CUBANS ARE USING YEMEN TO TRAIN PALESTINIAN REJECTIONISTS. MEANWHILE, SOVEITS CONVINCED SOUTH YENENIS TO CLOSE TRADITIONAL SYRIAN AND IRAQI ARMS SUPPLY ROUTE TO ERITREANS. NOW, BOTH COUNTRIES ARE FORCED TO USE SUDAN AS THEIR SUPPLY ROUTE. THIS, FARES CLAIMED, WAS ONE OF THE MAJOR CARDS NUMEIRI PLAYED WHEN HE RECENTLY CAME TO DAMASCUS AND IRAQ IN SERACH OF RECONCILIATION WITH EGYPT.
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8. RIFAI INDICATED THAT SYRIA AND IRAQ ARE FINDING GREATER IDENTITY OF INTERESTS IN WAKE OF SOVIET ACTIVITIES IN MIDDLE EAST. HE SAID HE HAD BEEN SENT TO IRAQ TWO WEEKS AGO TO EXPLORE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COUNTRYES. HE CLAIMED THAT IN MEETING WITH AL-BAKR, LATTER USED SAME CLICHES AND APPRAISAL OF AREA EVENTS AS DEJPUTY SECGEN OF SYRIAN BAATH PARTY ABDULLAH AL-AHMAR. SIMILARITIES IN THEIR POSITION, ACCORDING TO RIFAI, WERE STRICKING.

9. SEED OF DOUBT RE SOVIETS HAS BEEN PLANTED AND IS GROWING. IMMEDIATE IMPACT HAS BEEN TO DRIVE A WEDGE TETWEEN LIBYA AND DEMOCRATIC YEMEN ON ONE HAND AND SYRIA AND IRAQ ON OTHER. SYRIANS WILL DO WHAT THEY CAN TO PRESERVE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOVIETS AND MAY ONCE AGAIN BE INTRIGUED WITH IRAQI TIE AS WAY OF STAVING OFF POSSIBLE SOVIET ATTEMPT TO ISOLATE ASSAD REGIME. SYRIANS HAVE LONG FELT SOVIETS HAVE GREATER INTEREST IN IRAQ THAN IN SYRIA, BUT IRAQI PRICE FOR SUPPORTING ASSAD IS STILL LIKELY TO BE TOO HIGH, PARTICULARLY IN TERMS OF SYRIA.S COMMITMENT TO UNSC 242 AND ITS LEBANON POLICY. WE WOULD WELCOME EMBASSY MOSCOW'S COMMENTS ON SYRIAN PERCEPTIONS OF SOVIET POLICY.
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